THE RICH GIRLS OF ROSEDALE

Our families had the background and money to give us everything — the best schools, best ponies, best trips abroad. Yet for Les, beautiful cool Les, this was simply not enough □ *By Margaret Drury Gane*

I have known her all my life — that is, twenty-two and a half years. Right away, that fact is going to effectively blow any true objectivity I have in telling you about her; so draw your own conclusions about her somewhere in the centre of the compliments and criticisms. If her virtues appear to bloom oversized, like blossoms enshrined under convex glass, or her faults loom and multiply as if on a microscope slide, remember that I cannot give the "cool wide view," being so close to her. We are, I suppose, best friends, and nothing, including what happened, can truly change that, though the circumstances of our lives are now pointing in opposite directions.

In a sense, the friendship was cemented before we knew anything about the world we lived in. Only one week apart in age, we lived two mansions apart in the densely treed and hushed opulence of Rosedale. Our mothers had us in the same hospital, where they occupied strictly private rooms with lax visiting rules that only applied to the wealthy. Here, we were carried to our mothers, our new backs supported by firm newspapers hidden beneath the receiving blankets, into the quiet draped rooms with a large easy chair, a television, a radio, an ashtray or two — like being born in the Ritz, really. Little plastic wrist straps declared us to be Jennifer Allison Rutgers, me — and Leslie Elizabeth Metcalfe, my friend. Only the last names carry real weight, if you know anything about Metcalfe Construction and Rutgers Corporate Holdings. You may see them occasionally in social columns, where the crisp clever thing to do is announce their appearance at some elegant function by printing: "H. Allan Metcalfe (he's president of the big construction concern) and his pretty wife, Ellen, were among those enjoying" . . . etcetera, etcetera. Sometimes our mothers get extra mention if they wear the latest Ricci, or have recently taken the singles cup at the club finals. But what is most important is what is printed *between* those parentheses. Both Les and I were born between them, auspiciously named, and heralded by quiet glasses of champagne and expensive cigars passed around. The fact that we wailed as loudly, demanded as parasitically, and soiled our diapers as wantonly as the "other" babies down in semiprivate or public wards made no difference. If the Queen of England had borne us our futures could not be more financially secure, more patterned. Rich baby girls need no silver spoon — they are hallmarked from the first drawn breath — the private school *Continued on page 60*

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Mother attended, and often grandmother, too; the ballet lessons, the tutor, the credit card as a gift, the right summer camp.

I cannot remember all of this, of course. It's just that it is so traditional, still the same with little children I see around me now, that I know my beginnings were the same. Like a sceptre passed from grande dame to young matron to daughter, we represent a sort of introverted moneyed Olympics where wealth and family form the standards and hang the invisible medals about our necks. Both Leslie and I had nannies, twenty-four-hour, sleep-in women of high intelligence and capabilities who slept only a whimper away from us, fed us, walked us, took us to our mothers for a perfumed kiss before they left the house for Junior League, or volunteer work, or a gala at night. Decorum might have been the name of our baby food, because it was spooned into us very early in life: I know *I* confused wee-wee with the 'Oui, oui' spoken by our French maid. In our babyhood isolation, Les and I had no way of knowing that we were both aired on luminous lawns in silvery-grey English wicker carriages behind the stone wall, seven feet high. Beneath the carriages slept our dogs, Les's burnished red setter folded in slim arrogance, and our Afghan's pale putty-gold hair strung out from the centre part, delicately licking her slender paws.

My first clear memory of Leslie is in the warm, animal-decorated station wagon from Miss Richmonds' nursery school. It picked us up one morning, the first two children on the route, and I sat solemnly assessing the pudgy snowsuited girl staring at a painted lion next to her seat. We said nothing to each other until a week later, when I suppose it dawned at last that we lived close together. By that time, we were in our distinctive Little Learner uniforms, pleated navy skirts, white blouses, and red blazers with an emblem of interlocked Ls on the lapels. On her fifth birthday, so close to mine, I was invited to her party, which featured a band of clowns, a hired magician, and Tommy Fielding tossing up his bunny-shaped cake all over the pink tablecloth. From that point on, we were allowed to play together and grew to share more than the endurance of private school and a different uniform. The thing about Les and I is that we never competed. I was better in mathematics, and she got As in every history we took. Otherwise, we were comparably good in sports and drew alternating Bs and C-pluses in other subjects. We were comfortable together, with the bonds of common background, amiable natures and a sometimes lonely, sisterless state within our homes drawing us closer.

"Do you think it's *natural* to hate your brother?" Les once asked me while we mixed our homework with two chocolate bars apiece in her elaborate French Provincial bedroom. "I mean, *really* hate?" (We were fourteen, I think — the age where every strong statement or question sounded underlined, like Queen Victoria's diary.) "Do you sometimes *despise* Tod?"

I thought for a moment about my brother. Tod was well past the teasing stage, and what I saw of him now was a spotty seventeen-year-old who regarded me as a fat kid with petty interests and dumb conversation. "Yes." I replied. "Yes, I *do* hate him. Sometimes I loathe him."

Leslie's endless jeaned legs untangled themselves and she sat cross-

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legged, looking puzzled. I noticed that she had one of those bars you can pull apart, layer by layer; she examined each carefully, then reconstructed it.

"*I* think we feel that way because we can't c a t c h up with them. They're always saying: 'Wait until you're sixteen, or seventeen' . . . or whatever *they* are. But when you get there, they're still ahead, saying the same dumb thing."

We were both in private school, our graduating year, when I began to sense some change in Leslie. Outwardly, she was as conventional as ever. If neither one of us was a raving beauty, we were learning very quickly that style sense could turn you into the "interesting" young woman whose elongated nose was diminished by m a k e u p . . . or blatantly flaunted to good effect, like Streisand. Whatever it was that was churning around in Leslie went unnoticed by me b e c a u s e she *s e e m e d* the same. But one day, when we were waiting for the bus on our way home from school, a group of kids from the nearby high school came laughing up to the stop in a mass of jeans, thick colored sweaters, denim jackets with crazy patches on them — the sort of clothes we could only wear at home, after hanging up the spruce-green skirt and jacket, putting away the knee socks and the starchy white blouse. We stood a little apart, as we always did, watching them covertly, clowning and joking among themselves.

"I get the feeling they have more fun than we do," Leslie said.

"They seem a little immature to me."

"Watch it — or you'll get to sound like Tod."

One of the boys in the group, lank red hair blowing in the cold spring wind, hunkered into his thick plaid jacket, looked our way, the wary appraising look that always suggested challenge and some kind of forbidden excitement. He looked first at me, which immediately triggered *my* Look of Indifference — then at Leslie, whom I watched in some discomfort staring gently back at him . . . then, my gawd, *smiling!* The boy's tea-colored eyes w i d e n e d slightly, the corners of his mouth turned up, and he blushed a little and turned away. I can't explain exactly why I disapproved. Flirting was as common and as casual a business as plunking coins into the soft-drink m a c h i n e: temporary pleasure with no food value. But it was the surprise of seeing my friend, who was generally shyer than I, less likely to contest her parents on a point of conflict, more conservative in many ways, suddenly taking the initiative with a boy who . . .

Who what? I thought to myself with some shame. Who "goes public," the business term we private school kids used to refer to the outsiders? It was all right to giggle over their possibilities as dates — what they would be like, taking us by bus or subway to a movie. Talking and wondering were safe. We often admitted to an attraction to that other life we did not share, much in the way rich girls in the twenties went slumming, I suppose. There was a tough, rough-edged charm to those boys that drew us as naturally as we intrigued them. After all, we only had to look back a couple of generations to find one of them in our own families: the Irish immigrant who came to Canada penniless, crude and full of moxy and

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made his million — or *ours*, to be fair! I forgot about the incident, of course, because it was trivial; but perhaps it returns to me now as a kind of wind sock that hinted mildly at the breeze blowing differently for my friend.

We had a lot to think about and plan for that spring. Graduation, with its accompanying parties, one of which was a biggie, requiring a gown made by Madame Francine who did all my mother's clothes. (I sound cynical, I know, rather than grateful — but the mathematical bent in me makes it so.) I see that spring as one hundred and fifty invitations, four boring fittings, two bad migraines apiece for our parents and a social calendar crammed with bought corsages and an army of proficient invaders turning the house into a Grecian urn. The ball reminds me in retrospect of a Miss Canada contest — fifteen or twenty of us paraded in varying billowing or trailing gowns, shiny gelled cheeks and shellacked smiles. The guests, who knew the rules of the game at this stage better than we did, outdid themselves in the wealthy art of pretending not to be terribly impressed. Leslie had done that for me — given me some insight into the odd workings of guests. We sat together on my curved staircase with a plateful of goodies while our dates went off to get coffee.

Les prodded the air with her shrimp fork toward a woman standing gracefully in our huge hall, cupping a champagne glass in one hand and gesturing limply with the other. "See her?" "Mrs. Bond-West?" "Yes." Les ate the shrimp and said: "I saw her downtown during my fitting. She was looking at Fine Furniture, you know? Looking bored to death, dragging that black sable coat along behind her like a tame animal—" "So what?" Les flipped back her straight black hair, and shrugged. "I don't know. It just seems funny to me, having to look like having money was a bore. I mean, why couldn't she smile, have fun?" I looked below and around me at the swarms of buzzing beautiful people, smiling, having fun. I really couldn't understand what was getting into Leslie.

"Aren't you enjoying the party?"

"Sure, but that's just my point, Jen. How long can we go on enjoying the party? My folks have theirs next Saturday night, and I'll bet already they're making mental additions to make sure they outdo *this* one. I just don't think I want to grow up to look like these people."

"But they're *our* people, Les. I think they feel they're doing us a favor, I really do."

"Like the trip to Switzerland this summer, the little break before college in the fall?"

"Well, yes. That, too."

Les looked as though she was trying to decide something. "It's too easy for me, Jen. It's like perpetual Christmas, and soon I'll be pretending for their sakes that I *do* like it. That's just a step away from convincing myself, isn't it?"

"Look, would you rather be poor, is that it? All hung up with guilt? My own mother said she went through that, too, when she was working Fridays at a drop-in downtown. She got over it because you'd go birdy if you didn't!"

Les pulled in the skirt of her gown, spread like satin lettuce leaves across the polished oak stairs, so that a guest could pass us. It was my party, but I honestly did not know who the guest was. The boys came back with our coffee, Rick Graham and Jamie Portland—kind, mannered boys with impeccable evening clothes and hopeful struggling expressions. Rick and I were friends, and it is an irony that we enjoyed each other's company, so there was no real appeal. But Jamie Portland (he's the son of L. Ronald Portland, Plastic Components) was hung up on Les. He stared down at her with the gulping hunger and tunneled vision that obliterated everyone else around. As Les's mother said, she could do much, much worse . . .

SWITZERLAND careened and dazzled us like flicked pages in a calendar, though already we were learning not to show our excitement lest it be mistaken for naïveté. For instance, when Leslie mentioned to the girl seated beside her on the jet that we would be seeing Paris before going on to Switzerland, there was a small, capsuled conversation that shows just how far one-up-woman-ship can go:

"Paris?" the girl drawled leisurely. She was petite, syringe-thin and understated in dress and conversation both. "Well, forget the Left Bank. It's a bloody bore. And the Seine," the girl went on, her eyes indistinct grey behind tinted glasses, "just forget all the romantic glob you may have heard. I went down it three years ago on a boat . . . filthy! Same goes for Venice, if you decide to do that . . . like floating on garbage."

"A kind of sedimental journey?" Les said coolly, and I was proud of her.

We *were* booked into the "right" places; I guess I hardly need to tell you that. But we saw hundreds of other people who looked a lot like us, and this is what started Les on those strange disappearances. We had separate rooms, because we could afford it, and mostly because we felt we should get away from each other at least at night. I woke up one day, went to Les's door and knocked. No answer. I thought she might be oversleeping and phoned from my room. No reply. When I asked the desk if I could be let in, he laughed. Of course, if it was necessary! "But the lady ate early and left a message for you that she'd see you for dinner tonight."

"You're sure?" Something akin to annoyance at my doubting his ability huffed ruddiness into his cheeks and stiffened his spine. Without a word he slapped a paper with the time, the message and the recipient before me on the counter.

I explored some low-swelling hills for the better part of the morning, had Princess Grace's daughter pointed out to me at lunch, and shopped through the afternoon for souvenirs for my parents. We had some mail, too, a long reflective letter from my mom telling me how wonderful it was to be twenty and getting the grand tour. Something for Les that looked like Jamie's handwriting. I pushed it under her door at five o'clock and had a hot shower. I laid out an apricot dress for dinner then flopped on the bed to wait for her. By six, I was starved, angry, pacing the broadloom worrying that she might have got lost, hurt herself. Surely she might have told me what the hell she was doing?

I dressed, muttering things to the mirror, slapping cigarettes and trivia into my bag, and went down to the dining room, where I ate at a small candle-lit table off in a corner — at my request — to sulk and nurse the wounded pride. Let her fall off a mountain, for all I cared. I had worked myself up to quite a rage when she came into the room with that nice touch of anticipation and pleasure people have before dinner.

"Hi," she said, plunking down all shiny and burnt-looking, wearing her pant suit. "Have a good day?"

"My calf muscles hurt a little . . ."

"Climbing?"

"Well, isn't that what we're supposed to be able to say we've done when we get home?" A wedge of

soufflé wobbled and melted on my tongue.

"You're mad," she declared. "I'm sorry about being so long. But what a *day* I've had!"

"Oh?"

"That's why I was so long. I just plain forgot the time!"

And me, I wanted to add; but it was difficult to remain angry in the face of enthusiastic incandescence. Les was glowing. "Tell me," I insisted, melting like the dessert.

"Jen, I put on my jeans. Say, did you know everybody wanted to buy them right off my — well, anyway, they're scarce here. I bought a knapsack in the village, and I hitched a few kilometres down to the next place!"

"You *what?*" Visions of old ugly newspaper headlines printed themselves inside my head . . .

"I got a ride with a nice couple who spoke French, and I wandered around the town looking for a hostel. That's where I had lunch — a chunk of cheese, goat's milk and heavy fresh bread — it was unbelievable!" She waved away the waiter, hovering slender and attentive, with an order for coffee. "And the kids I met — a girl from Australia, a Japanese boy with an English-French dictionary who was so neat he *ironed* his raincoat, would you believe it?"

"Go on —"

" — and something fantastic happened. Know who I met coming down the road as I left?" Somehow I knew it wasn't Princess Grace's daughter: "No, who?"

She propped her chin on her hands, staring happily through the aureola of gold surrounding the candle tip. "Do you remember the boy we saw at the bus stop one day on our way home from school, the one with the red hair?" I nodded, attempting to put a face to the memory. "Well, there he was, just tromping down the road with one of those big red backpacks that look like parachutes. We knew each other right away. That's why I'm not hungry — "

"You ate him?" My joke poked feebly through her joy and she rushed on.

"No, dummy, I ate *with* him. Stew out of a can . . ."

I don't know if I can accurately describe how I felt that night. It was a shared joke between us that both sets of parents had arranged to speak privately to us — mine to her, and the Metcalfes to me — urging us to look out for the welfare of the other. When we compared notes, we'd found they'd both said almost exactly the same words in the same way. "She's very young for this, really, and impressionable . . ." Neither of us was, but parents have a funny way of attributing great wisdom to you where it *isn't,* and tender youth where it *isn't.* At the time, we were too wrapped up in ourselves to realize that the concern was love.

Hearing about Les's day, I felt envy, surprise, and because I had been asked to watch out for her, a duenna sense of having somehow let her parents down. What I now believe bothered me most was her new spirit of independence. I was her friend, but some of the sharing was going. She had chosen to be alone, and from then on during the trip, she repeated the action; only, gradually, she dropped even the explanations afterward.

College widened the separation as surely as nursery school had sealed the friendship. I enlisted in courses directed at a bachelor of science degree, vaguely hopeful of a white-coated future in a hospital lab. Les pursued history, the social sciences, a kind of hodgepodge arts course that might lead in any one of several directions. We saw each other socially, of course, calmed down now to women who sometimes double-dated, arranged lunch together when we could, telephoned occasionally. There was almost a forced desperation in our meetings — none of the exchanged secrets and laughing camaraderie that had made us sisters in our teens. Something contained and oddly secretive made it difficult for me to ask her personal questions.

I knew she was seeing Jamie Portland regularly. Her family and his were interwound in business as well as socially, so that Les and Jamie were invited somewhat like Tweedledum and Tweedledee, automatically paired, with both sets of parents pressuring from the wings. It is not a new phenomenon. No one ever had to say: "He is *like* us, one of us. To marry him eventually would be as much a safeguard to the continuance of your life-style as money in the bank, or excellent investments thoughtfully made."

For this reason (I had the same treatment myself at home) I wasn't completely surprised when Les turned up for one of our rare lunches with her left hand weighed down by an egg-shaped diamond ring. We were eating in the college cafeteria, moving our trays along choosing yogurt, a salad and skim milk, and the blue lights from her finger jabbed the air. So much was changed, wasn't it? No gooey chocolate bars for us now since we'd read you could never be too rich nor too thin. Yogurt, and a diamond ring.

"So he asked you — "

"Again," Les interrupted. "It isn't the first time."

IN RETROSPECT, knowing what I know now, it was like watching Romeo and Juliet in reverse, mutually respectful families urging subtly. And Les, sitting there, neither agog with delight, nor miserable. Simply eating her careful lunch and telling me that it would be a big wedding (against her wishes) in Thomas Charles Beaton United Church, where we had all lisped our first incomprehensible prayers.

"Will you stay in school?"

"Oh sure, until I get my degree, for whatever that's worth, and Jamie's settled in the business. Mom wants us to live at home, but I've put an absolute no on that idea. By the way, you'll be maid of honor, won't you?"

I agreed, naturally. In a complete reversal of my mother's generation, I had quite willingly been bridesmaid twice already, only too grateful I wasn't the bride. I was finding the lab work too engrossing to worry much about marriage, clinging in my compromising nature to the idea that somehow I would meet a man who worked at the same profession, pleasing me, and was extraordinarily wealthy, satisfying my family.

Les ate slowly, telling me of the reception planned even now as a vast home affair. "We would like to wait until next year, but my mother is terrified I'll get pregnant or something, so it's next month." I had been in contact enough times with the amazing Mrs. Metcalfe to know that the General Motors in her would manage that quite nicely.